First Surveys of Fairbury Area Townships

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The three primary townships in the Fairbury area are Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie. Before the first settlers could purchase land from the federal government, it had to be surveyed.

The same surveying crew conducted the initial surveys of Indian Grove and Avoca Townships, while a different crew surveyed the Belle Prairie township.

The records of these first surveys still exist, and they are in two different sets of documents. The surveying crew drew an original survey map for each township. These original survey maps for Livingston County townships are readily available online.

In addition to the survey map, each survey crew was required to make a log book called the Surveyor's Notes. These log books are also available from the National Archives website.

The original survey maps for Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie townships were done in the 1830s. The first settlers in Livingston County were Valentine and Rachel Darnall, south of Fairbury, in 1830. The McDowell family arrived in 1832 and settled north of Fairbury near the Avoca Cemetery. Very few families lived in the area, and there were no official roads when the surveys were done.

It is a tedious task to find the 31 pages that make up the Surveyor's Notes for the first survey of Avoca Township because of how they were reordered and then computerized. They are written in longhand and have not been transcribed to text.

Enoch Moore was the Deputy Surveyor for the crew that surveyed Avoca Township. He did some preliminary survey work in October of 1833. His crew did a detailed survey of Avoca Township that started on May 13, 1834, and concluded on May 31, 1834.

James B. Moore was the flag man for this crew, which also included a "fore chain man," chain man, and axe man. The crew surveyed Avoca Township for about three weeks.

Each township is six miles by six miles or 36 square miles. It is divided into 36 sections, each numbered from one to thirty-six. A section is one square mile and contains 640 acres. The surveying crew used wood stakes to mark the boundaries of each quarter section, which was 160 acres.

To mark each boundary point, the crew buried two quarts of charcoal at least three inches below the ground. They then made a dirt mound and drove a stake into the mound. If the

wood stake decayed or got lost, the charcoal would mark the location for many decades after the survey was performed.
To measure distances, the surveying crew used a lightweight chain that was 66 feet long with 100 chain links. Each link was heavy gauge wire just over nine inches long. They chose to use a 66-foot chain because half- and quarter-sections of land work out to be an even number of 66-foot-long chains. For example, one mile is 80 chain lengths, a half-mile is 40, and a quarter-mile is 20.

Because this lightweight chain could be damaged, each working chain was periodically checked against a "master chain." In several cases, when surveying Avoca Township, a working chain was checked and found to be one-half inch off in length. The crew adjusted the working chain to match the exact length of the master chain.

If the surveying crew had to measure across a creek or river, they measured and noted how wide the water was. For example, the Vermilion River was 100 chain links wide at one point. This number of chain lengths is equivalent to 66 feet wide.

In the 1830s, timber was growing along the creeks and rivers. The surveying crew noted the timber type in a township section. The tree types they noted were oak, hickory, burr oak, hackberry, linn, buckeye, elm, sugar tree, black oak, walnut, ash, white oak, and mulberry. Today, a linn tree is usually called an American Basswood species.

The surveying crew also noted the nature of the land they were surveying. In Avoca Township, they used two choices. The first choice was "rich prairie fit for cultivation." The second choice was "level rich prairie but too wet for cultivation."

Much of the farmland in our area was swampy in the 1830s because there was no easy way for the water to drain off the flat land. Clay field tile were introduced in the 1880s and changed the swampland into some of the most productive farmland on the planet.

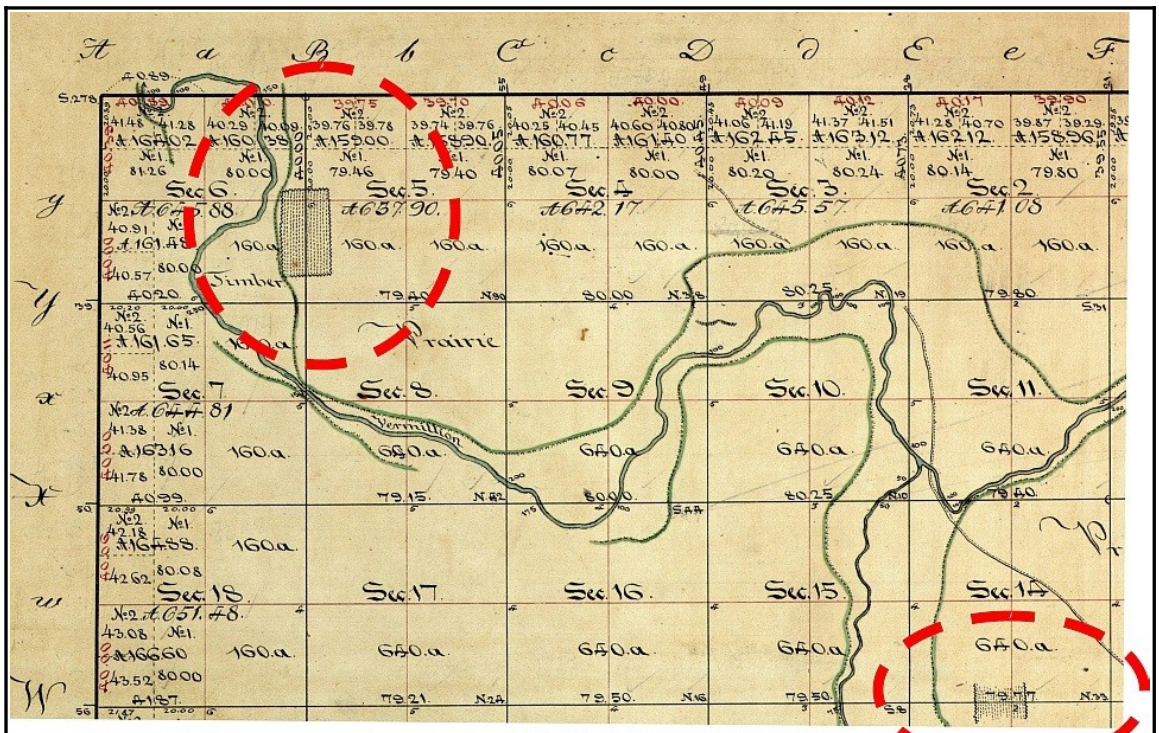
There were no official roads in the 1830s. After the land was purchased and farmed, the boundaries of most sections became roads. The Avoca Township surveying crew made two notations of two roads in the township. These were likely trails used to travel to a ford across the Vermilion River.

The first survey map of Avoca Township used two rectangular symbols. Unfortunately, no legends on these maps explain what the symbols mean. One is in the northwest corner of the township, close to the village of McDowell. The second rectangular symbol is in the vicinity of the Avoca Cemetery.

The surveying crew noted in their Surveyor's Notes that both rectangular areas were existing corn fields. 1840, after it was surveyed, William G. and Benjamin Hubbard purchased the land with the corn field close to McDowell from the federal government. Mr. William G. Hubbard was a pioneer settler in the McDowell area.

The land with the corn field near the Avoca Cemetery was on the southwest quarter of Section 14. Sarah McDowell purchased this quarter-section of land from the federal government in 1840, paying cash for it. She was part of the pioneer McDowell family that settled north of Fairbury in 1832.

The combination of the original surveyor's maps and their associated Surveyor's Notes is a valuable resource for learning about the history of our area. Except for the two small corn fields, Avoca Township was a virgin prairie with timber growing along the creeks and rivers back in 1834. To understand what this prairie might have looked like to the early surveyors, one can visit the Weston Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve on Route 24 between Weston and Fairbury. The Weston Cemetery is one of the few places in Illinois with natural prairie vegetation.



The original surveyors of Avoca Township showed two rectangular grids on their survey map. Their surveyor notes indicated these were existing corn fields they found when doing their survey. The northwest corn field was near the present day village of McDowell. The southeast corn field was near the present day Avoca Cemetery.